

THE
Discovery and Exploration
OF THE
YOUCON (PELLEY) RIVER

BY THE DISCOVERER,
ROBERT CAMPBELL, F. R. G. S.,
Lately a Chief Factor in the Hudson's Bay Company.

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THE YOUCON is the largest river that flows from the American Continent into the Pacific Ocean. Rising as the Pelly in the Rocky Mountains, on the northern frontier of British Columbia, it maintains a westerly direction for several hundred miles. It crosses the 141st meridian, which forms the Eastern boundary of Alaska, and holding a north-west course for more than 600 miles, it is joined by the Porcupine River from the north. Up to this point it is called the Pelly, but for the remaining 1,200 miles of its course to its embouchure in Behring Sea, it is known as the Youcon. In the following pages I shall briefly relate the events connected with the discovery and exploration of this river.

After the failure of previous efforts to establish a Hudson's Bay Company's trading post at Dease's Lake, I volunteered my services for that purpose; and in the spring of 1838, after 1838 overcoming many difficulties, I succeeded in my mission, and then crossed over the mountains to the west side, where I struck the source of a rapid river, which I ascertained,

from the hordes of Indians I met, to be the Stikene (afterwards the great highway to the north gold fields of British Columbia), a discovery which caused no small commotion and surprise at the time among Hudson's Bay men, especially from the fact that a young man with only a half-breed and two Indian lads had effected what had baffled well equipped parties under prominent and experienced Hudson's Bay officers from both sides of the mountains. This led to part of the coast being leased by the Company from the Russian Government.

On returning to Dease's Lake, we passed a winter of constant danger from the savage Russian Indians and of much suffering from starvation. We were dependent for subsistence on what animals we could catch, and, failing that, on "tripe de roche." We were at one time reduced to such dire straits that we were obliged to eat our parchment windows, and our last meal before abandoning Dease's Lake, on 8th May, 1839, consisted of the lacing of our snow shoes.

In the spring of 1840 I was appointed by

Sir George Simpson to explore the north branch of the Liard River to its source, and to cross the Rocky Mountains and try to find any river flowing westward, especially the headwaters of the Colville, the mouth of which, in the Arctic Ocean, had been recently discovered by Messrs. Dease and Simpson.

In pursuance of these instructions I left Fort Halkett in May with a canoe and seven men, among them my trusty Indians Lapie and Kitza, and the interpreter Hoole. After ascending the stream some hundreds of miles, far into the mountains, we entered a beautiful lake, which I named Frances Lake, in honor of Lady Simpson. The river thus far is rather serpentine, with a swift current, and is flanked on both sides by chains of mountains, which rise to a higher altitude in the background. The country is well wooded with poplar, spruce, pine, fir and birch. Game and fur-bearing animals are abundant, especially beaver, on the meat of which, with moose-deer, geese and ducks, we generally lived. The mountain trout are very fine and plentiful, and are easily taken with a hook and any bait. About five

miles farther on, the lake divides into two branches round "Simpson's Tower." The south, which is the longer branch, extends forty miles. Leaving the canoe and part of the crew near the south-west extremity of this branch, I set out with three Indians and the interpreter. Shouldering our blankets and guns, we ascended the valley of a river which we traced to its source in a lake ten miles long, which, with the river, I named Finlayson's Lake and River. The lake is situated so near the water-shed, that, in high floods, its waters flow from both ends down both sides of the mountains, towards the Arctic on the one hand and the Pacific on the other.

From this point we descended the west slope of the Rocky Mountains, and on the second day from Finlayson's Lake, we had the satisfaction of seeing from a high bank a splendid river in the distance. I named the bank from which we caught the first glimpse of the river "Pelly Banks," and the river "Pelly River," after our home governor, Sir H. Pelly. I may mention, in passing, that Sir George Simpson in a kind letter called them both

after me, "Campbell's Banks and River," but in my reply I disclaimed all knowledge of any such places. After reaching the actual bank of the river we constructed a raft, on which we embarked, and drifted down a few miles on the bosom of the stream, and at parting we cast in a sealed tin can, with memoranda of our discovery, the date, etc.

Highly delighted with our success, we retraced our steps to Frances Lake, where we rejoined the rest of our party, who, during our absence, had built a house on the point at the forks of the lake which we called "Glenlyon House." Returning, we reached Fort Halkett [on Liard River] about the 10th of September, and forwarded the report of our trip by the party who brought up our outfit.

The Company now resolved to follow up these discoveries, and with this view I was ordered in 1841 to establish a trading-post on Frances Lake so as to be ready for future operations westward. In 1842, birch bark for the construction of a large canoe to be used in exploring the Pelly was brought up from Fort de Liard with the outfit, and during the win-

ter was sent over the mountains by dog-sleighs to Pelly Banks, where the necessary buildings were put up, and the canoe was built in the spring of 1843. Early in June I left Frances Lake with some of the men. We walked over the mountains to Pelly Banks, and shortly after I started down stream in the canoe with the interpreter Hoole, two French Canadians, and three Indians. As we advanced, the river increased in size, and the scenery formed a succession of picturesque landscapes. About twenty-five miles from Pelly Banks we encountered a bad rapid,—“Hoole’s”—where we were forced to disembark everything; but elsewhere we had a nice flowing current. Ranges of mountains flanked us on both sides: on the right hand the mountains were generally covered with wood; the left range was more open, with patches of poplar running up the valleys and *burnsides*, reminding one of the green brae-face of the Highland glens. We frequently saw moose-deer and bears as we passed along; and at points where the precipice rose abrupt from the water’s edge, the wild sheep,—“big horn,”—were often seen

on the shelving rocks. They are very keen-sighted, and when once alarmed they file swiftly and gracefully over the mountain. When we chanced to get one, we found it splendid eating—delicate enough for an epicure.

In this manner we travelled on for several days. We saw only one family of Indians,—“Knife” Indians,—till we reached the junction of the Pelly with a tributary which I named the Lewis. Here we found a large camp of Indians,—the “Wood” Indians. We took them by no ordinary surprise, as they had never seen a white man before, and they looked upon us and everything about us with some awe as well as curiosity. Two of their chiefs, father and son, were very tall, stout, handsome men. We smoked the pipe of peace together, and I distributed some presents. They spoke in loud tones as do all Indians in their natural state, but they seemed kind and peaceable. When we explained to them as best we could that we were going down stream, they all raised their voices against it. Among other dangers, they indicated that, inhabiting the

lower river, were many tribes of "bad" Indians, — "numerous as the sand," — "who would not only kill us, but eat us;" we should never get back alive, and friends coming to look after us would unjustly blame them for our death. All this frightened our men to such a degree that I had reluctantly to consent to our return, which, under the circumstances, was the only alternative. I learned afterwards that it would have been madness in us to have made any further advance, unprepared as we were for such an enterprise.

Much depressed, we that afternoon retraced our course up stream; but before doing so, I launched on the river a sealed can containing memoranda of our trip, etc. I was so dejected at the unexpected turn of affairs that I was perfectly heedless of what was passing; but on the third day of our upward progress, I noticed, on both sides of the river, fires burning on the hill-tops far and near. This awoke me to a sense of our situation. I conjectured that, as in Scotland in the olden time, these were *signal-fires* and that they summoned the Indians to surround and intercept us. Thus

aroused we made the best use of paddle and "tracking line" to get up stream and ahead of the Indian signals. On the fourth morning, we came to a party of Indians on the further bank of the river. They made signs to us to cross over, which we did. They were very hostile, watching us with bows bent and arrows in hand, and would not come down from the top of the high bank to the water's edge to meet us. I sent up a man with some tobacco,—the emblem of peace,—to reassure them; but at first they would hardly remove their hands from their bows to receive it. We ascended the bank to them, and had a most friendly interview, carried on by words and signs. It required, however, some *finesse* and adroitness to get away from them. Once in the canoe we quickly pushed out and struck obliquely for the opposite bank, so as to be out of range of their arrows, and I faced about gun in hand to observe their actions. The river was there too broad either for ball or arrow. We worked hard during the rest of the day and until late. The men were tired out, and I made them all sleep in my tent while I kept watch. At that

season the night is so clear that one can read, write or work throughout. Our camp lay on the bank of the river at the base of a steep declivity which had large trees here and there up its grassy slope. In the branches of one of these trees I passed the greater part of this anxious night, reading *Hervey's Meditations* and keeping a vigilant look-out. Occasionally I descended and walked to the river bank, but all was still. Two years afterwards, when friendly relations had been established with the Indians in this district, I learned to my no small astonishment that the hostile tribe encountered down the river had dogged us all day, and when we halted for the night, had encamped behind the crest of the hill, and from this retreat had watched my every movement. With the exactitude of detail characteristic of Indians, they described me sitting in the tree, holding "something white" (the book) in my hand, and often raising my eyes to make a survey of the neighborhood; then, descending to the river bank, taking my horn cup from my belt, and even while I drank glancing up and down the river and towards the hill. They

confessed that, had I knelt down to drink they would have rushed upon me and drowned me in the swift current and after thus despatching me, would have massacred the sleeping inmates of my tent. How often, without knowing it are we protected from danger by the merciful hand of Providence! Next morning we were early in motion, and were glad to observe that we had outwitted the Indians and outstripped their signal-fires. After this we travelled more at leisure, hunting as we advanced, and in due time reached Frances Lake.

For a few years after this we confined our operations to trading, etc., between Frances Lake and Pelly Banks; but during the summer we sent hunting parties down to Pelly to collect provisions for our establishments; and by this means we obtained accurate information respecting the Pelly River, its resources, Indian tribes, etc.

In the winter of 1847-8, we built boats at Pelly Banks and, sending off our returns to Fort Simpson, we started off early in June, 1848, to establish a post at the forks of Pelly and Lewis Rivers which I named Fort Selkirk.

Ever since our discovery of the Pelly in 1840, various conjectures were hazarded as to what river it really was, and where it entered the sea. Fort Youcon was, I think, established in 1847, from Peel River near the mouth of the Mackenzie. From the first I expressed my belief, in which hardly any one concurred, that the Pelly and the Youcon were identical. In 1850, having obtained Sir George Simpson's permission, I explored the lower river, descending a distance of about 1,200 miles and by reaching Fort Youcon, proved the correctness of my opinion.

From Fort Youcon I directed my boat and party upwards into the Porcupine River. I was accompanied by Mr. Murray, who was conveying the returns, and whose duty it was to take back with him the Youcon outfit from La Pierre's House at the head of the Porcupine River, to which point supplies were transported over the mountains in winter by dog-sleighs from Peel River. La Pierre's House duly reached, we left our boat there and walked over the mountains to Peel River, about ninety miles; thence by boat we as-

cended the Mackenzie River to Fort Simpson. I thus performed a circuit of several thousand miles from my point of departure on the Liard River. Great astonishment was felt by all my friends and acquaintances when they saw me reach Fort Simpson by *coming up the Mackenzie River* instead of descending the Liard, for no one entertained a suspicion that the Pelly River had any connection with the Youcon or that the Pelly was linked with the Porcupine, Peel and Mackenzie Rivers. Thenceforward this new route, so unexpectedly found out, was made the highway for the transport of outfits to, and results of trade from, the Pelly and all intermediate posts.

When I visited England in 1853, this vast stretch of country,—until then a blank on the map, and untrodden and unknown of white men,—was under my direction, correctly delineated on his map of North America by the late J. Arrowsmith, the Hudson's Bay Company's topographer; and hence it happens that many of these rivers and places of note are named after my friends or after the rivers in my native glens.

I may mention that in these explorations, which embraced a period of 15 years, we had to rely for the means of existence almost entirely on the natural resources of the scene of our operations, however dreary and barren a region it might be. We were once cut off from all supplies and connection with our people, to the extreme peril of our lives, for over two years—from May, 1848, till September, 1850—during which time we received neither a letter nor supplies, and the opening up of communication with the outside world was ultimately brought about by our own unaided and determined efforts in the face of appalling obstacles.

The Pelly—Youcon—is a magnificent river, increasing in size as it is joined by the many affluents that swell its tide. It sweeps in a gentle, serpentine course, round the spurs of the double mountain range that generally skirts each side of the valley. Of these twin ranges the more distant is the loftier. Many of its summits are dotted with wreaths of snow, while others wear a perpetual mantle of white. At a distance of some

forty-five miles from Fort Youcon, the mountains recede, the river widens and for miles wanders among countless islands. Many of the Pelly's tributaries are large streams—especially the M'Millan, Lewis, White, and Stewart Rivers. Four kinds of salmon ascend the river in great numbers in their season; and then comes a busy harvest time for the Indians, who assemble in large camps along the river, and handle their spears with great dexterity. Large numbers of salmon are killed, some for present, and some for winter, use. This fish has been seen and killed above Pelly Banks, which is more than two thousand miles from the sea. Steamers from the Pacific have already ascended to Fort Youcon (twelve hundred miles); and during the freshet they can ascend more than twelve hundred miles further (to Hoole's Rapid). The lakes all over the country abound in excellent white fish.

The fauna of the country is abundant and varied. It includes moose and reindeer, bears, black and grizzly, wolves and wolverines, rats and hares, the fox, the lynx, the beaver, the

mink, and the marten. I saw the bones, heads and horns of buffaloes ; but this animal had become extinct before our visit, as had also some species of elephant, whose remains were found in various swamps. I forwarded an elephant's thigh-bone to the British Museum, where it may still be seen.

The flora of the country is rich and diversified. I forwarded several specimens of the vegetation to the late Sir William J. Hooker, Director of the Kew Gardens. I also sent him specimens of all the rocks from Youcon to Pelly Banks. The climate is more pleasant and genial than in the same latitude on the east side of the mountains.